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## THE REVOLUTION IN THE FIELD OF STAMMERING

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It seems to be a characteristic of revolutions that they are frequently well under way before the public realizes what is going on. Shortly before the Great War broke out a few copies of Dr. Albert Liebmann's *Die psychische Behandlung von Sprachstörungen* reached this country, and then the embargo shut off further copies; so it is perfectly comprehensible that the revolutionary character of its contents is not yet realized. Evidently even Dr. Liebmann himself did not realize the great import of his remark concerning the stammerer, "If he has to speak, he becomes excited and makes voluntary efforts intended to bring out the 'difficult' sound, but which actually obstruct it." Indeed, the complete application of the theory of conscious interference with automatic speech was subsequently made in this country, although the original view was first published in Germany. Probably no better means of showing the sufficiency of this new theory can be found than to round out with it the article by Mr. Mones in the *English Journal* for January, 1919.

Mr. Mones says, "The nature of stuttering seems to be a cramp or tetanus of some respirational muscle or organ, or some vocal muscle or organ, induced at first by some malignant nervous disorder and made permanent by habituation." Evidently a little revision of this view is necessary, because association and imitation are inducing causes of stammering, but they cannot be classed as a "malignant nervous disorder." Let us assume a revision and then prove that the revision is acceptable. It will have three parts, namely: (1) a temporary inducing cause which prompts conscious interference with automatic speech; (2) an accumulating fear of speech difficulty arising from the undue attention attracted by the convulsive interference; (3) further conscious efforts made in order to avoid the imaginary difficulty.

Let Mr. Mones elucidate this. He says of the stammerer, “. . . if he is trying to say a word beginning with *p* or *b*, he may compress his lips tightly and be unable to utter a sound.” Let the reader compress his lips and try to utter something. He will find himself, to all appearances, stammering. Of course his action is not prompted by a fear of speech difficulty. If it was, he would be a genuine stammerer; and every time the fear of speech difficulty came uppermost in his mind he would stammer, whereas every time the fear was in abeyance his normal speech would assert itself; and this alternation of impeded speech and fluent speech would constitute the “intermittence” characteristic of the disorder. Evidently the convulsive efforts—the pressing together of the lips, the holding of the breath, the pressing of the tongue against the teeth or palate, any of the stammerer’s efforts to speak—are voluntary.<sup>1</sup> With the so-called “tetanus” accounted for by a voluntary effort, the revision of Mr. Mones’s description of stammering seems to agree with his views. He frequently notes the habit nature which is evident in (2), the repeated and accumulating fear, and (3) the repeated effort; and he notes the transitoriness of the inducing cause (“. . . the stuttering of an adult has become largely independent of its inducing nervous derangement and has settled into a habit.”—Mones). Incidentally, note the remarkable verification of the revised view by Dr. Bryant: “In fact the cause or causes may have long since passed away but the effects remain as more or less of a mental or physical habit, or both.”<sup>2</sup> Mr. Mones seems to merge the inducing cause (1) with the continuing cause (2), and he believes that psychoanalysis may at least reduce them; but there is a fairly distinct demarcation between the inducing cause and the accumulating fear of speech difficulty. One of the least distinct demarcations is between the long debility induced by scarlet fever and the accumulating fear. Then the nervousness due to the fever may readily be mistaken for the nervousness due to the hampered speech. But by the time the psychoanalyst appears on the scene, he is probably too late to reduce the fever,

<sup>1</sup> “Physical stammering is purely voluntary.”—Bluemel: *Stammering and Cognate Defects of Speech*, I, 264.

<sup>2</sup> *Some Speech Disorders*, p. 15.

and neither his art nor any other will reduce the fear caused by continued indulgence in the impeding speech efforts. Nothing but fluent speech will reduce that fear, although it may be allayed temporarily by anything which attracts the stammerer's attention from it, such as hypnotism, suggestion, time-beat, whistling, counting, swearing (Mones cites praying), and so on. However, if the stammering is restrained, the fluent speech induced by these artifices gradually restores the stammerer's confidence and brings about recovery, especially if the practice is begun early. Professor John G. Murdoch overcame his stammering in childhood by counting ten every time he was inclined to stammer. The counting distracted his attention from his fear of speech disability; so he desisted from stammering, and the fluent talking which he did by means of the counting gradually built up speech confidence.

Now let us consider in turn the three divisions of the disorder with the view of ridding the race of it. Many of the inducing causes, No. 1, such as sickness, falls, accidental frights, and so on, cannot be avoided, so a considerable proportion of the stammering—probably more than 50 per cent—may be considered unavoidable. But the cases arising from imitation, association, and intentional fright may be much reduced. In this connection the teacher's duty is chiefly to avoid the spread of the disorder by imitation and association. The efficient means of avoidance, and generally the only feasible means, is to require the stammering pupil to refrain from the convulsive effort. He may use a synonym for the word which "sticks" him, he may wait until he is calm and then say the vexatious word, he may make signs, he may write, he may remain silent, but in his own interest and in the interest of the other pupils, he should not stammer.

The fear of speech difficulty, No. 2, is the obstinate factor, unless wise measures are adopted as soon as the stammering appears. This fear is incomprehensible to those who have never stammered, for they who have not had this most chastening experience are incapable of understanding how the fear of trammeled speech can drive one to melancholia and even to suicide. The fear is not of the trammeled speech but of the unkindness with which society treats that affliction. The Golden Rule has not yet been worn down

very much in its application to the stammerer. Consider the futility of all the hackneyed remedies to reduce this fear. It consists of memories of speech failures, so there can be no quick remedy except destruction of memory. Every indulgence in stammering intensifies that fear; every fluent expression weakens it. Recovery depends on the preponderating influence of fluency over impediment. If the stammerer declines to indulge in the convulsive effort, what remaining talking he does is fluent, and he begins to progress toward recovery. Then whatever extra fluent talking he does increases his rate of recovery. But for the confirmed stammerer that rate at best is very slow. Therefore the restraint of the stammering and the cultivation of the spontaneous speech should be begun without delay.

The convulsive efforts, No. 3, need no treatment. They need merely to be restrained. Some stammerers adopt that procedure of their own accord. They are called hesitant stammerers, for they appear to be hesitating only. There is no sign of the fear of speech difficulty. Such stammerers are progressing slowly toward recovery.

What will the authorities in the field of stammering do with this revolution? They will oppose it, just as the authorities in astronomy opposed the heliocentric idea, and just as the authorities in biology opposed evolution. What will the teachers do? Will they be prejudiced by that opposition? Or will they adopt the scientific attitude which Karl Pearson truthfully says must become general before superstition is overcome? Let us hope that the teachers, out of respect for their own intellectuality and that of the coming generation, will be open-minded. And how may they show their open-mindedness? Simply by adopting as a working theory that one which best satisfies the manifestations of the disorder. Whoever does that will have to accept the speech-interference theory of stammering—for the present at least—for it accounts entirely for every manifestation, and no other theory has even nearly done that. The speech-interference theory supplies the common causal factor, the reason for the sex ratio, the origin by imitation and by fright, the non-occurrence in advanced age, the reasons for such anomalies as fluent preaching and fluent singing

by stammerers—indeed, no question regarding the disorder is now without a satisfactory answer. By a satisfactory answer is meant a scientifically satisfactory answer. The terrible persistence of the accumulated speech doubt is no more pleasing to the confirmed stammerer than is the thought of a reptilian ancestor to the blue-stocking matron; but both the persistent doubt and the reptilian ancestor are evidently facts, and therefore unavoidable.

The completeness of the revolution in the field of stammering may readily be realized by a brief view of some of its consequences. Space is insufficient for a comprehensive view, for most of the dearly cherished ideas, ancient and honorable, are swept away. The inheritance of stammering is gone completely. That, however, supports Mr. Mones. Every vestige of disease—psychoses, neuroses, choreas, complexes, aphasias—is gone as completely, as is the special creation of species, although we will undoubtedly long have with us some authorities who will cling to the disease view as obdurately as Agassiz clung to special creation, thereby obstructing knowledge and discrediting themselves. Not only all the alleged cures of the past prove to be myths—which is not surprising, for the fact was an open secret—but the hoped-for cure seems to be as fanciful as a trip to the moon. Understand distinctly that the passing of the cure does not mean the denial of recovery. On the contrary, wholesale recovery is shown, recovery by as many as eight-ninths of the girl stammerers and a considerable proportion of the boy stammerers. Indeed, what appears to be discouraging in the loss of all prospect for anything that can properly bear the name of cure is far more than offset by the knowledge that the whole disorder may be readily extirpated within a few decades, for the means by which a great proportion of the stammerers now recover spontaneously may be applied to all stammerers; and that work will be done largely by the educators.

The most important reversal of accepted views, the reversal which will meet with the greatest opposition, is the relegation of the exercises—breathing, vocal, and articulatory—from the useful classification to the harmful one. The exercises are the most universal and the most firmly rooted practices in the field of stammering, and they will not come out easily. But their coming out

is inevitable; and the reason is clear. Stammering itself is conscious interference with automatic speech; and these exercises teach conscious speech, that is to say, they teach stammering. Let the reader endeavor to comprehend this sad fact, that it is the universal custom to teach stammering under the guise of curing it. But why was not the discovery made before now that the exercises were injurious? There are three main reasons. The stammerer showed improvement during the treatment, and his temporary improvement was published as cure, but his relapse was not published. Bluemel's statistics of the fallaciousness of 98 per cent of the reported cures is undoubtedly nearer the facts than Dr. Makuen's estimate of 90 per cent of relapses. Now, in case any advocate of the exercise for stammerers proposes to question their injuriousness, I will say for his benefit that I am writing from very extensive experience. I am a graduate of many stammering institutions. Testimonials of my cure were in print when I was practically dumb as the result of the tampering with my speech by means of lip movements and the multitudinous other exercises familiar to those stammerers who have made diligent search for relief. However, the injuriousness of the exercises was known from experience long before the speech-interference theory verified that knowledge. Thorpe in this country and Liebmann in Germany showed long ago that exercises intensified the difficulty ultimately, and the after-testimonials of pupils of stammering institutions show an increase in the stammering in the great majority of the cases.

What then should be the attitude of the teacher toward the stammerer? A view of the world from the stammerer's own eyes will answer that question. He is possessed by a fear of speech difficulty, and that fear is connected with the certain words and sounds which have bothered him most. If he is required to speak, and especially if he is required to speak those sounds, he is sure to stammer; but if he is free from speech requirements and has the privilege of speaking only when he feels able to do so, he will select the "easy" words and will express his ideas without stammering. In short, he wants freedom from speech requirements; and that is easy to grant. But so far society has obdurately denied him that

privilege; and as a consequence his whole life has been made miserable, if not ruined. From the very start—and even as the contributing cause of the start—he is kept in the habit by this inconsiderate treatment. He is a normal child who has just acquired speech. A vehicle knocks him down. His mother picks him up, and the questioning begins: “Are you hurt? Where are you hurt? How did it happen? Why were you in the street?” and so on, and so on. Dear reader, of all things, when a child gets a shock desist from questioning it; for if it endeavors to talk when its automatic speech is “knocked out,” it is almost sure to begin to stammer; and if it once begins, it will probably be forced to keep it up. Even a child is bound by speech conventions. It must say “Good morning,” “Good day,” “Good evening,” “You are welcome,” “I thank you,” “Goodbye.” Its parents, distressed at its impediment, try the experiment of curing it by making it talk; by making it go to the door in response to the ring, making it telephone, making it recite for visitors, making it go to the store on errands, and so on. School age comes and the teacher makes the wretched unfortunate come up front and exhibit its humiliation to the whole school. What will future generations say of the teachers of this generation who actually force the stammerer to do the very things which are the very worst for him? The stammerer’s instinctive aversion to stammering should long ago have led society to the wise treatment of him. Even a mule driver will respect the doubts of his animal about a weak bridge or an unsafe trail; but society ruthlessly disregards the stammerer’s wishes and forces him on to injury for life. It is principally the oral work required of the stammerers in the common schools which is keeping the affliction fastened on the race. That work is absolutely without excuse. The stammerer is only one in a hundred. The extra work put on the teacher by the reading of a written recitation from him would be negligible; but if the teacher objected to making that concession to him, then he should be allowed merely to listen in class and be marked on his written tests. Even the pronunciation of foreign languages should be eliminated; for such pronunciation is a great intensifier of the impediment. The doubt about the correctness of the pronunciation of the words, added to the speech



doubt, and the whole accentuated by the embarrassment of the class environment, make such work about the worst which a stammerer can undertake. I am safe in saying that I acquired a better knowledge of the foreign language which we took in college than nine-tenths of my classmates, but I never spoke a word in recitations.

Teachers who correct stammering in the public schools must really correct the stammering if they are to hold their positions long. If their present methods are injurious or ineffective, it is to the interest of those teachers to revise their methods. In short, it is to their interest to study Dr. Liebmann's booklet before the school board takes to studying it.

The stammerers in the schools are going to get justice; that is, they are going to get exemption from required oral work.

The non-stammerers in the schools are going to get protection from the infection of stammering; that is, stammering is going to be prohibited on school property.